

# Technical Assistance Bulletin

## Six Challenges to Effective Social Marketing Practice

*This bulletin will help prevention practitioners contribute to effective social marketing practice, particularly message and materials development, by helping them to recognize and overcome some of social marketing's most common challenges.*

### What Is Social Marketing?

Social marketing is grounded in science and driven by consumers. Social marketing emphasizes audience analysis and segmentation, strategic planning, execution of a plan, evaluation, and flexibility. An effective social marketer thinks about the audience—first, last, and always—whether the audience is described as the target audience, intended audience, target adopter, target consumer, or customer.

“Social marketing” is the use of techniques similar to those used by commercial marketers to address health and social issues. It focuses on an identified target audience, and attempts to persuade that audience—mainly through various media, messages, and materials—to adopt an idea, a practice, a product, or all three.

*CSAP, 1996*

Thus, social marketing requires (1) obtaining the best possible information about the audience at all stages of program development and (2) careful identification and analysis of the channels of communication used by the target audience.

### Challenges in Social Marketing

We are using the eight basic decision-making areas of social marketing as the basis of our discussion of six common challenges in contemporary social marketing.

- Market analysis: Limited availability of data on the target audience and the determinants of audience behavior
- Market segmentation: Pressure against segmenting and lack of behavioral data to identify segments
- Product strategy: Limited program flexibility, difficult product concepts, and difficult long-term strategies

- Pricing strategy: Difficulty in determining, measuring, and controlling consumer costs
- Channels strategy: Difficulty in utilizing and controlling desired distribution channels
- Communications strategy: Limitations of paid advertising, limited range of message appeals, and complexity of messages
- Organizational design and planning: Problems of functioning in organizations in which marketing is misunderstood and undervalued
- Evaluation: Difficulty in defining effective measures and isolating program contributions to social issues.

**Challenge 1:  
Social Marketing Expertise/Credentials vs.  
Hands-on Experience With the Target  
Population**

Since 1981, social marketing has rapidly become the "people's tool." Community workers, youths, parent groups, and others are trying their hands at social marketing as they develop materials and messages and launch local campaigns to help prevent substance abuse. Some social marketers applaud this trend, heralding the participation of target audiences in programs for their own benefit. Meanwhile, others view attempts to practice social marketing by untrained persons as a problem and are moving further to credentialize the field.

Whether the social marketing practitioner is a certified professional, a community worker, or a high school student, she or he must be educated in the principles of social marketing and possess or have access to appropriate resources in order to implement it effectively. Among professionals and nonprofessionals alike, taking shortcuts in the practice of social marketing can and will alter the outcome or success of the strategy. Anyone practicing social marketing should constantly assess his or her own skill set and find partners with

complementary skills. Teaming and balance is essential to success.

**Combine the Principles of  
Social Marketing With  
Appropriate Resources**

A communication project at Colorado State University successfully combined the experience of academicians, public relations professionals, and high school girls to deliver substance abuse prevention messages to the girls' communities. The university provided training and guidance to the girls in campaign planning, materials production, media literacy, and media relations. The public relations professionals created high-quality materials for the girls to adapt for use in their communities. The girls themselves provided the target audience perspective and served as messengers and role models to other young people in their communities. Although the partners in this venture had widely varying degrees of expertise, together they met the tenets of social marketing by recognizing each other's attributes and assigning roles accordingly.

**Challenge 2:  
Segmenting vs.  
Not Segmenting the Audience**

As in commercial marketing, the target audience in social marketing is the group of people selected to receive the message so that they will eventually adopt some knowledge, attitude, or behavior, such as supporting curfews for teenagers or avoiding tobacco use. Once



social marketers decide on the problem to be addressed and select the target audience, it is necessary to go to the next step in the planning process; determining how to manage the targeted population. This is one of the major decisions to be made by social marketers.

Quite often the size of the target population selected is too large and diverse for an effective program. Social marketing literature reinforces the need to segment the population, that is, to divide the larger body into subsets that are smaller and represent groups that have more in common. This permits the development of messages, strategies, and materials that address commonalities, and makes the effort more relevant to more members of the target audience.

Debate is nevertheless growing about the cost effectiveness of segmenting the audience and the need or value of doing so. As Bloom and Novelli noted in their market segmentation challenge, social marketers often face difficulties in segmenting audiences due to social pressures to treat all groups equally and avoid special treatment. This and other factors complicate the choice between segmenting and not segmenting.

Not segmenting the audience means selecting a single strategy and spreading resources across all segments of the population. This can be an appropriate approach if all segments of the population are similar in size, in occurrence of the problem being addressed, and in receptivity to the intervention. Populations, however, are rarely homogeneous.

The decision to allocate greater resources to a particular segment may be based on several factors, including larger size, higher rate and severity of the problem behavior, greater need for outside intervention, and greater ability and willingness among that segment to respond to an intervention. The payoff may be greater when more resources are allocated to those segments most likely to benefit.

Developing different strategies for different audience segments makes sense if the benefits, as measured in terms of program effectiveness,

outweigh the increased cost of developing multiple strategies. This can be achieved if each segment is large enough to merit separate treatment, each segment responds to different marketing approaches, and the marketing organization has the ability to create and deliver differentiated strategies.

When some segments are small, or resources are limited, a decision to focus on only one, or a few, rather than all segments is often made. Which segment is chosen depends on what has been learned about the problem, what other programs are underway in the target community, and what access social marketers have to that audience.

Segmenting can mean designing subgroup strategies for every subgroup of the population, or it can mean selecting those segments of that population most in need of and likely to benefit from a social marketing intervention. In either case, the rewards can be great if we know when and how to segment our audience—which is our next challenge.

### **Challenge 3: Segmenting by Demographics or Other Means**

The primary purpose of audience segmentation is to be able to develop programs that are consistently meaningful, relevant, and persuasive to members of each audience subgroup. Selecting subgroups based on demographic variables—such as race, age, gender, and geography—may result in the identification of individuals who share common experiences and worldviews. Thus demographic characteristics, which are indicators of underlying

If there were a Golden Rule in ethnic marketing, it would read something like this: "Thou shalt not assume your general marketing campaign is appropriate for the ethnic consumer."

*(Marketing Tools, May 1998)*

beliefs, values, behaviors, and culture, can be important when seeking commonalities. Yet there is a danger. Segmenting by demographics alone can lead to wrong conclusions and can stigmatize targeted populations. For example, segmenting based solely on race can lead members of a particular racial group and others to believe that they experience health problems purely because of racial status, to the exclusion of environmental, historical, and behavioral factors. To avoid this, experts suggest at the very least segmenting by multiple demographic variables.

Attitudinal and behavioral differences are other tools for delineating segments and for developing appropriate social marketing interventions. Within any target audience or segment are ranges of behaviors that effect the routes to the intended outcome. For example, in a audience of pregnant teenagers who smoke, some may have not tried quitting, some want to quit but get no support from their partners, and some have tried to quit numerous times. The intended outcome is the same (stop smoking), but the range of behaviors indicate the need for a range of interventions. However, as Bloom and Novelli pointed out, social marketers often lack meaningful attitudinal and behavioral data about their audiences. Studies are needed to develop these data, which can enable effective segmentation by uncovering nuances and revealing information about contributing causes of health problems. For example, segmentation based on attitudinal and behavioral data can bring attention to the influences from peers, adults, and entertainment that encourage marijuana use without stigmatizing young people.

The most useful audience segmentation pairs demographic with attitudinal and behavioral characteristics. Using this approach to audience segmentation can be a two-stage process: (1) reviewing demographics for basic understanding and (2) analyzing attitudinal and behavioral audience data to refine the definition of target audience further.

#### **Pair Demographic With Behavioral Characteristics**

*Jump Start*, a substance abuse prevention and life skills program for economically disadvantaged, high-sensation-seeking African American teens, addressed a target audience at risk based on both demographic (low socioeconomic status) and psychological (sensation seeking) factors. The program's designers reasoned that because high-sensation seekers are attracted to varied, novel, and complex stimuli to meet their sensation needs, they would be attracted to prevention messages that have these same features. The high-sensation-value classroom-based program, which included video and interpersonal elements, proved effective for both high- and low-sensation seekers. Most telling, however, was that significant pretest differences between high- and low-sensation seekers in attitudes toward drugs and use of alcohol and marijuana were neutralized, indicating a greater effect on the high-sensation-seeking target audience.

*Source: Health Education and Behavior, 1997; 24(5): 568-586.*

#### **Challenge 4: Conducting Primary Research vs. Using Existing Data**

Developing effective programs, messages, or materials requires having the best possible information about our audience. The best way to get accurate information about the target audience is to conduct extensive market research. Useful research methodologies



include literature reviews, one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Challenges to conducting sufficient and sound market research, however, include time, expense, skills, and organizational mandates. In addition, social marketers typically have less accurate secondary data about their target audiences. Thus, many social marketers are relying on existing research, such as focus group reports generated by other programs and findings from surveys of similar audiences. This information is limited but does have value. For example, it can alert us to issues that may need to be explored further through our own research.

#### **Take Existing Data and Involve the Target Audience**

Campaign planners for CSAP's Urban Youth Campaign uncovered sparse existing literature on African American youth with regard to alcohol and drugs. They found that the information tended to be on use and victimization due to the direct impact of violence and crime on individuals and the community. They also found that information about the community at large was essentially absent from the research, although the community was very much a part of the audience's reality. After discovering these gaps in the literature, local Urban Youth Campaign sites conducted their own research to fill the gaps and better define and understand the alcohol and drug experiences of African American youth at the community level.

An effective way to meet the research/data challenge is to begin with existing data, especially the secondary data found in academic and scholarly literature. Journals such as *Health Education and Behavior*, and the *Journal of Health Communication*, can often be helpful. On-line searches can lead to current research findings. State and county departments of health often have current epidemiological data. By taking existing data and involving the target audience (by using for example, focus groups, surveys, and interviews) social marketers can validate the data, determine gaps, and answer remaining questions with original data.

#### **Challenge 5: Staying the Course vs. Redirecting Based on New Findings**

Social marketers can encounter challenges to even the best-laid plans in the development or implementations stages of a program. And once plans are formalized and approved, deviations can be difficult. Yet new information can, for example, reveal new perspectives on the problem being addressed, uncover new audience segmentation strategies, and contradict earlier findings about message channels. Faced with such challenges, should social marketers maintain the course or redirect efforts based on new findings?

The answer is that effective social marketers abandon preconceptions and remain open to the directions that come from the audience. They consider new ideas while keeping attention focused on overall program goals and good social marketing practice. The approach, design concepts, and implementation must change as needed based on new information obtained during the social marketing process.

### **Flexible Response to New Findings Results in Campaign Success**

What happens when the appropriate market research reveals to social marketers that a program's goals differ from the audience's needs—as in the case of CSAP's Urban Youth Campaign, *We Have Better Things To Do*? The comprehensive program design originally intended to address substance by inner-city African American youth based on the idea that these youth were using drugs at higher rates than other youth populations. However, after the primary program goal of reducing drug use was adopted, campaign planners learned that several studies, including the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, reported that drug use was lower among African American youth than among White youth. They additionally learned that adults in the community resented direct intervention without their input and consent. Planners then considered the audience data and refocused the campaign message on the reinforcement of the resilient characteristics of the target audience. And they identified and targeted a secondary audience—community adults—with the message that youths' positive activities should be supported.

### **Challenge 6: Sticking With Tried and True vs. Using Something New**

The tried and true is well accepted, easier to develop and implement, and requires little challenge to current paradigms. Tested and successful methods are supported by individuals, organizations, and the field as a whole. For example, brochures are used extensively to communicate health messages. People understand their standard usage; templates and machines for easy production are available; and social marketers find brochures familiar and comfortable.

Something new can be exciting and bring attention to our efforts, however. A new social marketing technique or a new type of product can generate excitement and produce improved results. Furthermore, specific audience segments, such as those mislabeled as "hard to reach," often require a departure from the tried and true methods. The hard-to-reach population may include some ethnic groups with language and literacy issues, different cultural practices, and rural or inner-city populations.

Something new requires discipline and grounding in audience research. Extensive information about the target audience is needed to provide direction regarding the need for and types of innovation. Room for creativity is also needed. Involving nontraditional participants (such as youth) in our decision making, abandoning rote formulas for success, and incorporating models from fields outside of social marketing or prevention can foster creativity.

Today's tried and true interventions were once innovations. For example, the widely used and much heralded prevention fotonovelas for Latino audiences were nonexistent 15 years ago. The key for social marketers is to consider the standard and new options equally, weigh costs and benefits, and make a strategic choice. Although innovations involve risk due to lack of existing evaluation data, they can yield fruitful outcomes.



### Focus on Outcomes

An organization concerned with addressing substance abuse in Native American communities created a packet of materials to encourage community members and leaders to work toward defeating alcohol and drug problems. Striking artwork and attractive packaging promoted membership in the organization but nevertheless fell short in terms of communicating the benefits of the program to the individual, the tribe, and the larger Native American community.

### In Summary

Social marketing is exciting and can be effective even in the face of diverse challenges. Social marketing practice requires balance, judgment, skills, and exploration. The challenges described in this bulletin demonstrate that there is no one right way to make social marketing decisions. The social marketers/prevention practitioners need to anticipate the challenges and meet them in creative and logical ways.

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This bulletin is one in a series developed through CSAP's communication team. It is designed to assist programs working to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drug use and abuse. We welcome your suggestions regarding information that may be included in future bulletins. For help in learning about your audience, developing messages and materials, and evaluating communication programs, contact CSAP's communication team at 301-941-8500.

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